

Questions and Answers About Pandemic Flu and Avian Flu



What is pandemic flu?

Pandemic flu is a global outbreak of severe influenza.

What is the major difference between pandemic flu and seasonal flu?

Pandemic flu is the result of a virus that is easily transmitted — like seasonal flu — but is caused by a completely new strain of influenza that the human body has never encountered before and therefore does not have antibodies against. As a result, flu pandemics tend to be more widespread and more severe, causing more frequent complications and increased numbers of deaths. Seasonal flu is a more familiar strain of virus that many humans have encountered in some form and therefore are better equipped to combat.

What is avian or bird flu?

The term bird flu is somewhat misleading because there are numerous strains of influenza carried in the intestines of wild birds. Most avian strains of flu do not cause illness in the birds that carry them but may make domesticated birds such as chickens and ducks sick when they come in contact with wild bird carriers. The term bird flu, or avian flu, as it is widely used today, refers to a single strain of influenza virus called H5N1, which had not been widely seen until 2003 and which has killed more birds in Southeast Asia since 2003 than any flu strain in recorded history.

Can humans get bird flu?

In general, avian flu rarely infects humans. But it is possible for humans to contract influenza viruses from birds. In the case of the H5N1 virus, it has been found in people who have had direct or close contact with infected poultry or contaminated surfaces or, less frequently, in close family members living in the home and caring for an infected person. As of November 2006, there have been no cases of H5N1 avian flu in either birds or people in the United States.

Is bird flu a pandemic?

Bird flu is not a pandemic. To cause a pandemic, a virus must be able to travel easily from person to person. A pandemic occurs when a virus can be transmitted in the same way seasonal flu is spread — through coughing, sneezing and other invisible but routine contact. While it is possible to contract the H5N1 virus strain from another person, it appears to require close and prolonged contact and has occurred rarely.

Could bird flu become a pandemic?

Flu viruses are extremely adaptable, changing form in order to spread and reproduce. The concern is that the H5N1 strain might eventually adapt in such way that it can be easily spread through coughing and sneezing. If that happens, it could become a pandemic.

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What are the symptoms of H5N1 or bird flu?

The symptoms of infection with the H5N1 virus in humans range from human influenza-like symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches to eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory diseases (such as acute respiratory distress) and other severe and life-threatening complications.

Is it possible to prevent pandemic flu?

It would take months to develop a vaccine to any new pandemic strain of influenza. However, the same kinds of health hygiene practices that are effective in preventing any virus — such as washing your hands frequently and covering your face with the crook of your arm when you cough or sneeze — will also help prevent spread of a pandemic strain of influenza.

When was the last pandemic flu outbreak in America?

A new strain of flu dubbed “Hong Kong flu,” because of where it was found, first hit America between 1968 and 1969. This was a mild pandemic, causing approximately 33,800 deaths.

What was the worst pandemic in U.S. history?

Between September 1918 and April 1919, the so-called “Spanish flu” killed approximately 500,000 people in the United States.

What is the federal government doing to plan for a possible pandemic?

In 2005 the federal government issued a national strategy designed to guide the response to a pandemic, should it occur. The plan covers such issues as coordination among state, local and national public health agencies; capacity to produce a vaccine against a new pandemic strain; stockpiling antiviral medications; and launching preventive public health outreach campaigns.

What is Virginia doing to plan for a possible pandemic?

Virginia also has a detailed preparedness plan to implement in the case of pandemic flu. The plan includes information about available health care resources, various government agency and community responsibilities, and other items crucial to containing a pandemic and minimizing its impact.

Is there anything I can do to prepare for a possible pandemic?

The best thing you can do is stay healthy and practice good health hygiene such as washing your hands frequently and coughing into the crook of your arm. Also make sure you have a reliable source of timely information you can turn to in a crisis, such as www.vdh.virginia.gov/pandemicflu.